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The Scurf of Time

Jamie Muir

Just after the Packer uprising - in the library of a small hunting lodge that had been converted into a private retreat by the late Protector of Kantung Province, a construction of stone and wood painted in the colours of rose, sky-blue and gold, perched precariously on the edge of the mountain crags high above the summer palace - a young English soldier was found embraced in the arms of the Princess Ling Ping.

They were both dead.

This play is a reconstruction of the moments that preceded this tragic event, that had so moved London society of the day.

°

. . . . . the soldier had been detailed to list and pack the contents of the library and move it to safer ground before the rebels reached the summer palace.

Crump crump crump
"What's that noise?"
"What noise is that Maam?"
"It sounds like clump clump clump."
"No idea Maam, no idea at all."
Crump crump crump
"There it goes again." chirruped little Ling P.
"Oh that's the distant shells, washed up on the beaches of humanity by the squalling swells of war."
"Oh oh oh" wailed little Ling P. glumly, making her mouth into a long distended pouting spout of dewy petulance, and casting a rueful glance of yoyo elasticity that struck the far wall, and went clean across the other side of the room and out the window without damage, and hopping from foot to foot in tremulous agitation, she wrung her hands upwards or so.

"The petals of chrysanthemum know not the taste of tears. My paps dream of ripe summers in Shinkai Province, where the swallows store my thoughts beneath the eaves of the sky. Sing 'PLOP' frog, call 'CRAKE' snow egret through the weeping mists and stabbed by the hard rain to the heart." She turned back to the bookcase.

'Love in the time of cholera'
'Love in the time of dandruff'
'Love in the time of aids'
'Love in the time of rubber aids'
'Love in the time of foreign aids' . . . .

"One night when my father was out with his neighbours hunting through the rice fields with fiery tapers for the white wire worm that eats away the crops, my mother was visited on her sleeping-mat by a cricket, that whispered in her ear. From then on she spoke not another word, and lived from day to day in silent rage, until finally she looked so abruptly at the objects of her disapproval her face fell off and she was buried beneath the water-butt, to keep the ghosts at bay.

My father pined away and died - 40 years later, a rich and powerful man in the arms of his 13th wife of 14 summers.

You see I am a poor orphan" she sighed, "torn by the claws and thorns of this cruel

world, my tender flesh like the bushy bloom of the magnolia, cool in the spring full-moon, pines for a strong man's love and protection to wrap my timid heart about with his warmth. Who will protect me fwom this cwuel, cwuel wowld?" she whimpered pityfully, turning from him and bowing her ravenous black hair. Her fragile shoulders shook with bleak despair.

'Love in the time of sex'

'Sex in the time of love'

'Sex in the time of dandruff'

- and then something occured to her - and then it didn't.

'Love in the time of sexy dandruff'

'Sex in the time of lovely dandruff'

"What is your name proud soldier?" queeried little L.P.

"I was christened Henry, but you can call me Hei Yeu - everyone else does."

"Oh Hei Yeu - ho Hei Yeu - hee ho Hei Yeu - ho ha ah ha Hei Yeu - yeu hoo Hei Yeu, who Hei Yeu? - - oh ah ha ha ha Hei Yeu, I like it I like it." She jumped up and clapped her hands gayly and did the same, then lapsing, exhaled a long soft breath of scented sorghum and swept the floor with reminiscences.

'Cholera in the time of lovely sex'

'Sex in the time of lovely cholera'

'Whither the lark'....

Clump clump clump

"That's the Chinese rebels returning the shells now Maam." Little L.P. turned to the earnest young soldier, and after an awkward pause, her face hot with blushes, said -

"Oh proud Hei Yeu I have a splinter in my heart. The poetry of your sausage swells beneath your robe and soon must speak words of love to my poor splintery heart. Just once, thread your silvery skeins through my eye, so we two may sew one stitch into the silken scarf of time, ere we pass away."

'Playboy'

'Playgirl'

'Play Misty'

'You barely live once'....

"The Shades of Death stalk the valley planks far down below our eyrie here, wrapped around by cloud and held in thrall, blessed by the respite of cool altitude, the Gods drip their compassion down around us like a shawl and in gentle kindness offer us this last deep draught of the last of all wines."

Crump clump crump clump

"The shells are getting hotter as they fly ho Hei Yeu, unbind your loins and let fall your burden. The fountain of my love is bursting in my brain, and makes me giddy with splintered rainbows. My swimming blinds me in my head . . my heart explodes . . my toes turn to sherbert -

come to me."

We draw a curtain discretely on the lovers.

Then we open it again -

Oh you so proud of sausage accidentals
Not thus so prominent us ornamentals
By skillful massage vulvic, labial and dental
And readily obtained by hourly rental
Should you desire it vigorous or gentle
We'll pleasure you with tea then drive you absolutely MENTAL.

Then we close it again.

Clump crump clump crump
clump
crump
CRUMP
.....

PROLOGUE:

It's just a ploy, to call this prose a play
It came to me as sleepless night turned into day
And wrecked upon the shelving shoals of wayward dreams
Where 'proper' form is never what it seems
Nor 'proper' in unseemly pleasure as it flows.
So who am I to Rule that humour poetry and prose
Should not combine and weave and flow and go where'er it goes?

.....

Rebus: *Blue flags open by mechanical means*

Lawrence Upton

Blue flags open by mechanical means: two linked swimming pools filled with dyed water seen from an aeroplane; a road as straight as the edge of a window; the pattern apparent in everything from this height. The oyster beds are largely empty - cans and wrappers float in the sea. A smear of effluent colours the transparent water. A dead sheep rots in the midst of brilliant grass.

Rebus: *Wood grain weathered till it's like waves*

Lawrence Upton

Wood grain weathered till it's like waves, a boat partially obscured, figured on them, upended, only the front half visible, the bottom as if bitten off just stops on the line representing the underside though the top goes under, edges once smooth crumbling brittle

A red meteorite drops over blue sky; ripples out from its crater zero which infills. Tsunami, fault lines, a chisel gouge in green wood; the letter N, the letter V, both encircled, initials but no vows on a tree deep into what's left of woods; far from land, shallows inexplicable to the brain which sees land as high and sea you bathe in shallow and all the rest deep till you have gone so far out you can go so far down you meet monsters . . . She says: It's too hot to feel passion; we're both sweaty; our bodies smell. How can you desire me? I can. I want to . . .

I pull away loose bark and uncover insects living in clusters on a curve of tacky wood, like an instep, the bark shaped like the tongue of a shoe to match it. He says later: In the dark I wasn't even sure she was . . . that we were . . . she's so soft, her fingers, just saying she was, to convince me she likes me.

I lost carnal interest: I went soft as a warmed ice cream block, trying to analyse the sensory input. If she'd said I'd rather not, it wouldn't matter, after the sea goes back at the beach edge, down in a depth where the pressure's up and the air's sour and everything slows, congregates grainily, lights more occasional, eel tongue sucking a hunting way in coral murk, masts and detritus point out of the sea/bed. Two a.m. shapes of memory imposed on shapes from fogged eyes, cupboards become caverns; a figure stands in the doorway mouthing omens; a man lies dead across the erect ironing board . . .

Even this poem, or the mood which brought it, has been destroyed, as easily as chalk marks, the space even, the necessity for something still there but the system of images itself gone. New things come in, but not things of that which wiped the bored sequence. The way a wave's work with sand and seaweed is undone when it's pulled by gravity making a new pattern with still something of the old, what it had made unmade in a moment as it was made. And the new wave comes in, the consequences of that pull back, the overload in the bulk of water held, the flip of the tide; and in a brain's internal meditational accidence, anything might overbalance and start the swing back; the oscillation is asynchronous. But what it was which started, I don't know, gone now, washed away in the sentences of judgements made flimsily.

A spider swings from the sunshade, hauling in. The way that chance mutations starting species do not repeat, only their consequences, leaving no evidence, which made Charles Darwin so perplexed and worried. Wind swings the spider like a bramble's end; or a fish in the ocean swimming solo. Currents in all things. An aircraft overhead, its sound rippled like the top of the bedclothes in the morning; and the spider rises towards the anchor of its own lifeline's fixture overhead, or now it hangs dead, and *rising*, but its legs not working, curled over like a lower case omega.

Signs hang limp in the fallen wind saying ntinental, tinental, ep, prep. Tumult of a generator keeping us cool, deafening the patio garden. Spider swinging against the startup wind, like a fly, is gone, blown away maybe. What mentality? *Other* than mine . . .

. . . . .

Hugger-mugger

Chris Blackford

Tuesday

The 'Holy Land' still reverberates with the news that a pair of soiled boxer shorts has been passed on to one of the tabloids for an undisclosed fee. They are his, the MP's, positively identified, but by whom the police are not saying.

Thursday

His wife is on the front of nearly everything I

read. Her face is multiplied on screens in shop windows I pass on the way to nowhere in particular. Rumour spreads here like a black bile disgorged from this network of alleyways and courtyards, heavy with the stench of animal excrements and piled-up refuse. She is on the front of nearly everything. Her fragrant face and necklace and ear-rings from another world, captured in the twinkling of the camera's eye.

Wednesday
This time there will be no Aldo Moro letters tucked out of sight between the cracks of faint hope and despondency. In a few weeks time the marzipan centre will probably collapse and I will have to replace the shelves over the mantelpiece. It is not my fault. Sacrifices have to be made. I know there are others feeling this way, too, but they are afraid of hating too much. But this can be spread evenly like margarine across many shoulders. Shit for breakfast and shit for tea. Some people have a lot on their plates.

Thursday
My little yard looks lovely when the sun is out. I took an old broom to it, scraping away the moss and stuff at the bottom of the wall with my fingertips. Woodlice and beetles scuttled into daylight. That yellowy extractor fan that was playing up only needed a good clean. I set to with a frayed toothbrush I found wedged behind the cistern in the bathroom. The little prop now spins a chalky white, gives off a low drone. But sometimes I can still smell bleach.

Friday
One can spend a long time on things that aren't important, can't one. Yesterday, I put out my favourite ochre tablecloth and a couple of doilies for me and the pot of darjeeling. The trains rattled by on their tracks. The wall is low enough for me to see, but high enough to stop any debris thrown up from their wheels. Inside, on Breakfast TV, mediums tramp open fields. Long established rooks' nests in wintry treetops. They say the spirit world is in league against me. Lifting manhole covers they peer into the darkness they call my soul. What sort of person could have done a thing like this, they ask. They lie in shallow ditches, bound with litter, convulsing messages through the ether from eternity.

Thursday
. . . Anyway, I am a widow (I hate that word). Still, I am glad I got that over with. My husband died 2½ years ago on 23 June. How I wish I could block out that date in my mind and pretend it was a bad dream and wake up and everything be back to normal. I have a son who is now 4 years old. He is my sole reason for living and going on in life. He and my gun-dog Race and my parents. I am also an ardent ELVIS PRESLEY fan and I love Phil Collins and Genesis and the Beatles and John Lennon, especially seeing as I was brought up in the north. I am medium height and build. I am 5ft 3¼ ins. Not very tall, but I'm 5ft 4 with my heels on. Please excuse the writing paper, but my son has used up my best paper for his doodling. Well, that's all for now.

Tuesday
I stood stock still by the bushes at the edge of the park. Made myself into a sail for the restless wind to billow. Curtains drawn and blinds pulled down. The hum of a milk float

coming closer, ceases. The spirit world is in league against me, but the spirit of Carroty Kate reaches out and embraces me across the many decades between us. The smell of unwashed clothes is in my nostrils. She is as large, as strong as I imagined. Her hair as flaming, her voice as deep and wild. The front teeth have nearly had it. The skin is paler and more pitted through years of neglect. I look into her eyes and see slum upon rows of Victorian slums, oozing hatred and despair between the cracks of elegant facades. Maybe we will spend some time together, or maybe there is nothing much to say. I read that many followed you and I would have followed you, too. I read that you gave some poor bastards hope.

Monday
There is this image I have of me looking out of a window. One of those windows in the roof with a wooden bar you pull up or push down (I can't remember) to open. This image comes to me nearly every day. I don't force it, it just seems to come of its own volition. And I am looking out over a grimy railway station, or across back gardens with somebody out there feeling to see if the washing is dry.

Thursday
. . . Actually your name was on my last list, too. However, I started going out with someone a few weeks ago and we seem to be getting on rather well, so if you don't think it too much of a cheek I'll keep your name and address handy, and if this relationship doesn't work out, then I'll get in touch with you, then. I am 5' 7½" tall, slim, light brown hair and wear glasses. My dislikes include politics, jazz music, snooker, red hair or bald heads, rain and fog. Please write back telling me a little about yourself and please enclose a photo (I think that's very important).

Wednesday
This is about invisibility, about being seen but not missed. People think the invisible are not seen, but they are everywhere: in the busiest shopping centres, eating sandwiches in the park, along backstreets too dull and unsavoury to bother with. Every year hundreds more in Britain are made invisible by poverty, homelessness and mental illness. They are walking past you all the time. The centre of quiet, unsuspected worlds.

Monday
I walked down by the old reservoir and heard the sound of distant traffic coming across the water. Dusk: and a wino taking a leak down there, told me that people were saying that the hands of Pat Jennings were bigger than the hands of God. They are still using the same photo of the MP and his wife. The other night I dreamt that she had found him still in his suit, neat and tidy, and in one piece. I took my shoes and socks off and waded out into the water. My feet felt the outline of the souls of public schoolboys like so many smooth and scattered pebbles. I pressed harder and they were like eggshells collapsing. Wisps of yolk detaching, rising to the surface. Two small bags containing nailclippings and stubble have been sent to another tabloid. I am working from the extremities, inwards.

. . . . .

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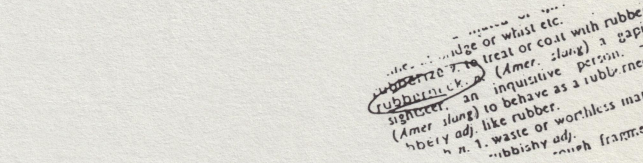
rubberize v. to treat or coat with rubber.
rubberneck n. (Amer. slang) a gaping
sightseer. an inquisitive person. —v.
(Amer. slang) to behave as a rubberneck.
rubbery adj. like rubber.
rubbish n. 1. waste or worthless material
rubbishy adj.

. . . short ideas repeated
Massage the brain . . .
Robert Ashley, 1979